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Nate Parker's *The Birth of a Nation*: Classical Hollywood Cinema or Independent Rebellion?

Caroline V. Schroeter

Abstract: *The depiction of racial minorities such as African Americans has changed over the last decades and the film industry is experiencing a period of transition towards new images of black identity. In this context, my article explores the complexities of Nate Parker's cinematic slave narrative The Birth of a Nation (2016). Parker's choices are constantly guided by reimagining, revising, and reclaiming the (hi)story and the representation of African Americans. I argue that, although Parker attempts to set his film up as an oppositional force to D. W. Griffith's The Birth of a Nation (1915), his employment of a style that is heavily reliant on the conventions of classical narrative storytelling makes such aspirations problematic. This article demonstrates Parker's use of classical features and considers whether he subverts the dominant mode by creating an independent black film, or whether his message is weakened by his reliance on (white) industry standards.*

The representation of African Americans, race and identity in popular media has noticeably changed in the last hundred years since the emergence of modern cinema and, consequently, has shaped our biases and perceptions of the world around us. The construction of race on screen influences the viewer's identity as well as social attitudes towards others. These constructions are as complex as they are deeply personal, notably in terms of what tropes are used to represent specific racial identities and, indeed, how they form and change over time.

In this context, a subgenre of the historical epic, that of the cinematic slave narrative, has developed and stabilised over the past decade. These audiovisual narratives are fictive reimaginings of history, constructed with the creative license of their makers, and contain elements of both the literary slave narrative genre as well as the neo-slave narrative. They are usually feature-film length with the exception of TV series. Like their literary predecessors, cinematic slave narratives generally give a portrayal of North American slavery, but the genre may be extended to cinematic narratives of slavery and slavery-like institutions in other cultures, countries and contexts (e.g. Cary Fukunaga's 2015 *Beast of No Nation*). While not necessarily aiming for historical accuracy, they are created to transport an essential message to the audience about the abhorrence of slavery and its legacy. By basing these stories on the historical lives of enslaved men and women and by bringing them to the screen, filmmakers harness the power and mass appeal of visual storytelling to discuss American slavery and its persisting impact on contemporary US society.

In the last five years, the development of the cinematic slave narrative genre has seen a dramatic increase; we have witnessed how "slavery has been re-introduced as a theme in American popular culture" (Hill). As Justene Hill suggests, film, television and new media

have become the “safest space for viewers to contend with the complex history of slavery and race in America”. The struggle to understand the past and present now takes place “before a flat-screen television, through streaming movie websites, and in the comfort of movie theaters” (Hill). Films such as Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained* (2012), Steve McQueen’s *12 Years a Slave* (2013), Nate Parker’s *The Birth of a Nation* (2016), Ava DuVernay’s *13th* (2016) and series such as *The Book of Negroes* (Virgo and Hill, 2015), the remake of *Roots* (Van Peebles et al., 2015) or *Underground* (Green and Pokaski, 2016–) have had great success in the theatres as well as with critics. They have inspired filmmakers “to bring slavery to the fore of American entertainment”, offering viewers “more vivid ... representations of slaves’ lived experiences in the United States” (Hill). With their ability to display iconic images to mass audiences and to be particularly powerful in reimagining and influencing views of history, cinematic slave narratives have become key players in the public conversation about race, representation and African-American identity. Due to their popularity, the cinematic slave narrative genre (film and TV series) has also become lucrative to film producers. According to IMDb, *Django Unchained* scored \$425.4 million at the box office, *12 Years a Slave* earned \$187.7 million, \$556 million for DuVernay’s *13th* and *The Book of Negroes* accrued more than \$360 million in DVD sales. It is possible, then, that since a commercial imperative tends to drive the cycle of popular themes in film, it will also impact the production of future cinematic slave narratives.

The increase in the production of cinematic slave narratives also goes hand in hand with a highly divisive political climate and a general trend in black cinema to keep an informative and educational conversation at the cultural forefront. As Dexter Gabriel argues, “slave films tend to reflect the politics of the moment. ... We have a hard time talking about slavery to each other, so films become the surrogate”. Moreover, the increase in black film and series productions has given black actors and characters more agency within the industry, as well as more opportunity to portray historical figures with greater depth. For example, TV shows such as *Roots* or *The Book of Negroes* exemplify the proliferation of the long-format series, where characters can more gradually be developed, and their stories more richly articulated.

This article sheds light on both the development as well as the complexity of the short-lived success of one specific cinematic slave narrative: Nate Parker’s 2016 *The Birth of a Nation*. Through a close reading of the film and mise-en-scène analysis, I will demonstrate how conventional and, indeed, how problematic the film turned out to be, despite its initial praise, and discuss Parker’s relationship to the D. W. Griffith film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Griffith’s film is, for example, a key point of comparison in my discussion of the representation of women and history in Parker’s film. Moreover, I explore how much Parker relies on dominant modes of representation and formal codes of storytelling. In this context, I consider whether Parker adopts the dominant mode in order to subvert it, or whether his black power message falls short as a result of his reliance on (white) industry standards.

Parker’s film was initially celebrated as “instant rapture” (Barnes, “Sundance”), setting a sales record of \$17.5 million at the Sundance Film Festival in 2016, and “hailed for depicting an important untold chapter of American history” (Truitt). The film was premiered, and later released, at a time in the US when society “was newly, acutely aware of severe racial tensions—inequality, police shootings, protests” (Lederman). In this context, the film built salient connections between history and the present, and the audience’s joy and hope for a new dawn of sweeping social change was reflected in the reactions to its premiere at the Sundance Festival.¹ The warm reception and great success at that festival “was undoubtedly

fuelled by the desire to solve (or hide) Hollywood's racial disparities with a dashing new auteur" (Schulman). Parker, who wrote, produced and performed in the film, was a new black director (and leading actor), who was interested in offering a reimagining of Nat Turner's 1831 slave rebellion against white slave owners and their families in Virginia.² The historical figure Nat Turner was an enslaved religious preacher in Southampton County who prepared and then led a group of other enslaved men in a revolt against their enslavers. In comparison to other cinematic slave narratives such as McQueen's *12 Years a Slave*, Parker's film focuses on slave resistance and black heroism rather than using the traditional escape to freedom format.

It is important to consider how America's political and social milieu at the time of the film's premiere contributed to its initial overwhelmingly positive reception. The general build-up of enthusiasm behind Parker's seven-year "labor of love" (Pallotta) was informed by prevailing social concerns such as the accumulation of frustrations and racial tension, for instance in Ferguson, Missouri, as well as the final months of Barack Obama's presidency and the protracted 2016 election campaign. In a time particularly characterised by, among other issues, the resurgence of white nationalism, the film sparked considerable public dialogue about race, and it continues to make a timely contribution to current debates on the role of minority groups in American society in the early twenty-first century. Its release also dovetailed with the #BlackLivesMatter movement and seemed to provide a belated corrective in the aftermath of the #OscarsSoWhite debate (Barnes, "Tricky Goal"). These movements were created to protest police brutality and the decades-long rise of for-profit prisons, a judicial system which appears biased against black communities, and the beginnings of the Ku Klux Klan's rebirth in some Southern States (Archibald). As Hill suggests, in this time of political uncertainty, when right-wing populist groups are gaining traction in the press and high-level public affairs, the role of popular culture and media is essential in helping viewers take in and digest the stark reality of the "failed idea of a 'post racial' America". Parker's decision to change the typical emphasis of the slave narrative from the slave as a passive victim to a defiant and independent protagonist, then, "is reflective of a larger cultural shift, occurring simultaneously as the Black Lives Matter movement sweeps across the United States and Colin Kaepernick takes a knee during the national anthem" (Lawson).

What adds further significance to his project is the idea of profoundly revising master narratives—stories largely written from a white perspective—and connecting the deep undercurrent of racism in America's past to the pervasive effects of institutionalised racism in society today. By offering representations of powerful black masculinity and basing the film on the historical figure of Nat Turner, Parker attempts to present a challenge to white cultural dominance, both in film and in society. Articulating his dismay about Hollywood's portrayals of African Americans, and the fact that it seems to not have moved very far forward after a hundred years of cinema, Parker seeks to depart from the negative racial stereotypes. In a 2016 interview, he described the power that cinema can exert in this context, and expressed his hope that his "black" *The Birth of a Nation* might be used as "a tool to challenge racism and white supremacy in America, to inspire a riotous disposition toward any and all injustice in this country (and abroad), and to promote the kind of honest confrontation that will galvanise our society toward healing and sustained systemic change" (Rezayazdi).

Approaches and Directions in Parker's *The Birth of a Nation*

Parker begins what might be viewed as a black cultural dialectic by seizing ownership of the title of Griffith's film. Although the 1915 classic is often described as an "aesthetic masterpiece" (Stokes 108), "a new milestone in film artistry" (Bowser) and generally thought of as the first American blockbuster, it has also been condemned as "the apotheosis of racist, historically haywire Southern mythology" (Sieder qtd. in Stokes 10). The film draws from a range of historical texts including Thomas Dixon Jr.'s *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden—1865–1900* (1902) and *The Clansman: A Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905), which celebrated the concepts of anti-miscegenation and white supremacy that characterised the dominant Southern social ideology during the Reconstruction Era and, later, during the decades of Jim Crow. By repurposing the title and by rewriting the existing versions of Nat Turner's story, Parker's film demonstrates not only the significance but also the necessity of rethinking screen portrayals of African Americans. Historically, popular culture has relied on dominant stereotypes that have developed and persisted over the last several centuries. These stereotypes are also prevalent in the literary works by, for example, Thomas Gray, William Styron and other influential works created by white men in their previous imaginings of the Nat Turner story.² Consequently, in an interview with Jada Yuan, Parker is emphatic about his need to tell a different story and makes the case that his approach is both thorough and unapologetic, beginning with Griffith's title:

I wanted to put a spotlight on this film—what it did to America, what it did to our film industry, what it did to people of color with respect for domestic terrorism. There's blood on that title, so I wanted to repurpose it. From now on, *The Birth of a Nation* is attached to Nat Turner, one of the bravest revolutionaries this country has ever seen. (Yuan)

Parker states that his narrative about slavery and acts of (black) resistance strives to help the viewer visualise American history from an African-American perspective. Particularly in the context of #OscarsSoWhite, he has asserted that his film is a salient answer to the call for provocative cinema and a different representation of African Americans on screen. *The Birth of a Nation* (2016), then, asks the audience to rethink how black characters are portrayed and shows the importance of (re)considering the role of resistance within the context of American slavery in film. Parker suggests that his film appeals to a diverse but divided society and that he hopes to offer a cathartic space within which self-examination, and a conversation about the construction of national and cultural identity, might unfold.

It is evident that Parker regards himself as an independent filmmaker, claiming his success at Sundance as "a win for independent film ... and filmmakers" (Parker qtd. in Wheat). This assertion indicates that he sees himself and his film outside the system of the Hollywood industry and, by implication, outside of dominant modes of representation and the dependence on classical narrative concepts. However, his claim of independence, which he seems to understand as being supportive of revolutionary action, is brought into question by how indebted he is, on a formal level, to many of the conventions of classical narrative cinema that emerged in American film in the wake of Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*'s release.

In an analysis of Parker's film, Kenneth W. Warren suggests that Parker's claims are undermined by the very conventions of characterisation and structure taken from the

institutional norms that he seeks to undermine. He argues that Griffith, the “father of cinema” (Stern and Gallen 46), managed to establish himself as the father of cinema

because he invented or improved on an array of cinematic techniques that subsequent filmmakers, including Parker himself, are heir to. And by rolling along in well-established grooves of cinematic storytelling, Parker’s *The Birth of a Nation* silently pays homage where it ought to be figuring out how to push back. (Warren)

Warren states that Parker’s reliance on classical narrative conventions results in a film that perhaps inadvertently pays homage to Griffith, and that does not deliver on Parker’s promise of offering new paths for black cinema and for the representation of African-American characters. To this end, this article explores the cornerstone attributes of independent film in relation to Parker’s *The Birth of a Nation* and discusses whether or not his project truly embodies the ethos of independent film.³

In the past, the independent film industry has often supported filmmakers who are “neglected by the major studios, among them ethnic, racial, sexual, and political ‘minorities’” (Reid 11), providing them with opportunities to create their works. Black filmmakers have been a minority since the advent of cinema and their presence and involvement in the American film industry continues to be limited. Despite Hollywood’s “racial ceiling” (Reid 14), independent black filmmakers like Charles Burnett, Melvin van Peebles, Haile Gerima and Spike Lee have produced critically acclaimed artistic masterpieces such as *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (Van Peebles, 1971), *Malcolm X* (Lee, 1992) and *Chi-Raq* (Lee, 2015). Van Peebles’ film, for example, “established a new heroic paradigm for the black cinematic hero as sexual, individualistic, and violent” (124). Black filmmakers have also directed work that challenged Griffith’s film and its legacy with regards to the issue of racial representation on screen, for instance John Noble’s *The Birth of a Race* (1918), Oscar Micheaux’s *Within Our Gates* (1920), D. J. Spooky’s remix entitled *Rebirth of a Nation* (2007) and Spike Lee’s short film titled *The Answer* (1980). Many black filmmakers, too, have used the Nat Turner story as the basis for historical recreations, most notably Charles Burnett’s multi-perspective documentary, *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property* (2003).

According to Reid, black independent film, for instance, *Bush Mama* (Haile Gerima, 1979), is often characterised by a nonlinear narrative structure, experimental filming and camera techniques and unconventional content (124). Gerima and his colleagues follow an approach to independent film praxis that requires “a resolute struggle against the classical Hollywood narrative form and its bourgeois ideological content. Avant-garde and experimental camera techniques deter the recurrent critical and spectatorial relationships that classical narratives usually enjoy” (Reid qtd. in Holmlund and Wyatt 124). A rejection of every convention may not always be possible, though. Reid argues that it is “more advantageous if a filmmaker’s work attracts and engages large audiences by manipulating various styles—classical, avant-garde, and experimental—to produce an interesting cinematic form while still articulating politically sensitive but appropriate issues and themes” (124). Parker’s work seems to echo this sentiment, at least in its appeal to large audiences while vocalising his message of anti-racism and the power of black masculinity. His “black Braveheart” (Curwen) certainly contains provocative, rebellious, political content, and he brings to the screen what many of Hollywood filmmakers have never depicted: the violent insurrection against and slaughter of white slave holders and their families by African Americans (Cieply and Fleming).

Parker's film does not, however, display traits of experimental filming or avant-garde camera techniques such as "the use of collage and abrupt editing" (Reid 110) as, for example, Haile Gerima's *Sankofa* (1993) or *Bush Mama* do. Neither could his film be regarded as one that displays a resolute struggle against the classical Hollywood narrative—in fact, the opposite is at play here. Parker does not disrupt "the spectator's pleasurable identification with story and protagonist, thereby refusing the relationship that the film spectator has with classical Hollywood narratives" (Reid 110)—as, for example, Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* (2000) or *Malcom X* (1992) have done—*The Birth of a Nation* does not attempt to construct such a confrontational viewing experience, but rather works towards moulding and maintaining a stable connection with the viewer, one underlined by the fostering of a sense of empathy between viewer and protagonist. As I will show, even though Parker's film contains several scenes of graphic violence, its lack of disruptive stylistic devices ensures that the audience remains "sutured" into the narrative and retains a sense of identification with Turner. Significantly, Parker chooses not to include scenes that were part of the historical record, such as the murder by Turner and his men of the wives and children of the slave owners. Parker's reliance on biblical imagery and his attempt to have the audience empathise with Turner would have been undermined had he shown Turner and his men killing innocent people. For the same reason, Parker also ignores another critical historical point, that Turner's rebellion led to the murder of several hundred free and enslaved African Americans, the passage of stronger, anti-black legislation, and the implementation of more draconian punishments against black slaves.

Parker's *The Birth of a Nation*: An Example of Classical Hollywood Narration?

Since Parker wants to maximise the appeal of his film and accommodate a variety of viewers, he uses classical narrative storytelling and the formal conventions of a historical epic, adhering to what David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson have identified as the dominant Hollywood mode of representation—for example, a three-act structure; the use of soundtrack and specific camera techniques, such as close-ups, for emotional resonance; exposition of character; encouragement of audience identification (24). His employment of the most simplistic and emotionally wrenching representations—his use of affective codes (e.g. in his camerawork, editing, music)—is the most "logical" way of reaching the widest possible audience and does not in itself automatically negate his mission to show violent black resistance as a call to arms and a demand for stronger representation of African Americans. However, it could be viewed as problematic, as critics such as Leslie Alexander, Demetria Lucas D'Oyley, Rebecca Carroll or Vinson Cunningham have noted, because of Parker's own promotion of his film as the radical antidote to Griffith's film and other Hollywood films that stereotyped black characters. According to Alexander, Parker's film can be interpreted as a "collection of every cliché image and story line from every movie you've ever seen about slavery: Slavery was bad. Black people were treated badly. Black people got whipped, tortured, raped, and killed. Black people fought back, but still got whipped, tortured, raped, and killed". Moreover, Parker's decision to lean on traditions of the Hollywood industry contributes to weakening the film's message and his mission to start the intended conversation about national and cultural identity.

I want to turn now to an analysis of how Parker constructs both his narrative and his protagonist and how much he draws upon the model of filmmaking that underpins much of Hollywood practice. This analysis relies on the definitions and interpretations of Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson in their work *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of*

Production to 1960. In particular, three elements are of specific interest because they help demonstrate the influence that Hollywood modes of representation, many of which are derived from Griffith's work, have exerted on Parker as a new filmmaker.

As Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson note, classical narrative storytelling favours unities between use of space, narrative logic and gradual exposition of characters. Classical Hollywood cinema establishes space in a scene in two ways: immediate or gradual. The immediate approach to "narration begins with a long shot that establishes the total space" (Bordwell et al. 64) quickly establishing the full spatial scope of the scene to the audience. The gradual approach introduces the spatial extent more slowly, often beginning "by showing only a portion of the space—a character, an object, a detail of decor, a doorway: the scene will begin by framing a detail and then by means of various devices (dissolve, cut, iris, or tracking shot) will soon reveal the totality of the space" (64–5). Parker uses a combination of these two approaches to establish space in *The Birth of a Nation*. On the one hand, he uses the immediate approach throughout the film, presenting the viewer with beautiful, yet uninspired/clichéd, sweeping shots of cotton fields and plantation houses to immediately establish the general space and setting of the action. On the other hand, he also uses the gradual approach when the setting is less important than the content of the scene itself. Parker opens on a scene in which the viewer is denied visual (and narrative) clarity, and perhaps he does so to suggest that underneath the Southern plantation façade, with its drooping trees, cotton fields and pillared houses, there is another pulsating culture that draws from an older African tradition. In the opening scene, the camera tracks Nat and his mother Nancy (Aunjanue Ellis) as they run through a forest. Their faces, as well as those of other African Americans, fade in and out of focus, and the shots are accompanied by diegetic sounds of nature and of African drums and singing, creating a mystical and mythical atmosphere. The scene is set at night, its subjects illuminated only by a fire, and the effect is the creation of a sense of illicit secrecy for the viewer. Here, Parker not only gradually establishes two conflicting spaces, and the cultures that inhabit them, but also demonstrates the importance of African traditions, and the necessity to participate in such rituals under the cloak of secrecy.

Parker then presents the audience with the title of the film and gradually eases us into the story. The following scene uses a gradual approach to present the simplicity of a friendship between two children: Nat and Sam, the son of the white slave owner. Parker undermines our assumptions that children know no racial prejudice by introducing foreboding elements into the visuals that serve to unsettle the viewer: during a game of hide-and-seek with young Sam Turner (Griffin Freeman), the camera focuses on young Nat (Tony Espinosa) who first hides from Sam, then laughingly breaks free and wins the game, foreshadowing later events in their lives. The camera pans across the plantation, slowly following Nat, who runs across the property, through the slave quarters and to the "big house". Gradually, through a wide-angle shot, the viewer is shown where this story is taking place and is introduced to the main characters (Figure 1).

This scene is foundational in its introduction of the viewer to the plantation environment and to the main characters that will propel the plot. The lighting is mellow and, while the atmosphere is lighter than in the preceding sequences and is accompanied by nature sounds such as the chirping of cicadas, there nonetheless remains a sense of a foreboding eeriness. This sequence is especially interesting in two ways: first, it establishes the space in which most of the story will take place, the slave quarters and the master's house. Second, using the element of time and foreshadowing, it depicts the gradual process, and demise, of the relationship between Nat and Sam: from playful and amicable to unbalanced and

corrupted by slavery. As they grow older, their relationship is destroyed by Sam's alcoholism, his role as a master in the system of slavery and by Nat's growing radicalisation. The blending of the immediate with the gradual approach here, then, does "not simply signal the locale", but also serves to "place characters within it" (Bordwell et al. 65).



Figure 1: Young Nat Turner (Tony Espinosa) running across the Turner plantation.
The Birth of a Nation (Nate Parker, 2016). Bron Studios, 2016. Screenshot.

Griffith's opening sequence establishes the revelatory screenplay format now common to Hollywood cinema, which "first indicates the place, then the time, and then the character action" (Bordwell et al. 65). The viewer is introduced to the film's individual locations while the time and context are established with intertitles. The story's protagonists—members of the Stoneman and Cameron families—are also presented; for example, an iris shot shows Austin Stoneman (Ralph Lewis) together with his daughter Elsie (Lilian Gish) in her Washington apartment, and her with her brothers Phil and Todd (Elmer Clifton and Robert Harron) enjoying themselves at the family's country home in Pennsylvania awaiting the Camerons' arrival from South Carolina.

Parker follows this format methodically as well, as can be seen in the scene when Turner meets Cherry (Asia Naomi King) at a neighbour's plantation. First, he establishes the place, "a shot of the vault of trees on an estate and the fine white-columned colonial house behind it—that is revealed to be inseparable from slavery" (Brody). Then, he establishes the time through conversation between the characters and, finally, he indicates Nat's goal and plan of action: to court Cherry. This pattern fits neatly into the classical Hollywood idea that "the film progresses like a staircase: each scene should make a definite impression, accomplish one thing, and advance the narrative a step nearer the climax" (Bordwell et al. 16). Early on in the film, Turner advances the story through his actions; he strengthens his relationship with Cherry, who will eventually become the *raison d'être* for starting his rebellion. This is reminiscent of Griffith's film in which Ben Cameron (Henry Walthall), the "Little Colonel", drives the action of the story and his decisions advance the plot. It is ultimately the death of his "Pet Sister" which motivates him to form the Klan in order to end the blight of "black terror" on Southern society.

Characters, then, "act and react according to principles of individualised character psychology ... [as they] struggle, collide, and make decisions" (67). Turner continuously

struggles to make sense of his whole life and, at crucial times in his development as a character, collides with the system of slavery. It appears that all this external and internal conflict builds throughout the film, ultimately motivating his decision to organise the rebellion and inflict violence against the agents of oppression around him.

The entirety of Parker's film can likewise be seen as the culmination of the struggle-collide-decision pattern, which dominates the narrative logic and story line. One scene in particular stands out in which "action triggers reaction [and] each step has an effect which in turn becomes a new cause" (16). This concept becomes clear during the verbal duel between Turner and the white Reverend Zalthall (Mark Boone Junior). In a medium shot Parker shows a group of white men, including Sam Turner, Zalthall and another unnamed white man, surrounding Nat (Figure 2). Zalthall, using biblical verse to insist on the righteousness of Turner's enslavement, receives a powerful rebuke from Turner, who himself retorts with quotations from scripture, answering each of the Reverend's passages with one of his own. Zalthall's action triggers Turner's reaction, which, in turn, triggers Sam Turner's action to strike him down and later to administer punishment that will lead to Turner's alienation from Sam and further convince him to initiate a rebellion. This scene also helps facilitate Parker's insistence on Turner, bleeding on a cross as punishment for his righteousness, as a Christ figure (which will be discussed later).



Figure 2: Nat Turner's (Nate Parker) biblical clash with white men. *The Birth of a Nation*. Bron Studios, 2016. Screenshot.

Clichéd Representation of Women and the Role of Rape

In the classical Hollywood narrative, leading characters are usually goal-oriented, striving to change the situation or position they are in. Individual character traits (e.g. speech patterns or behaviour) personalise the protagonist, and his or her goals become the story's main "causes of action" (Bordwell et al. 16). Turner's character, as performed by Parker, conforms with the archetypal goal-oriented protagonist inherent to the classical Hollywood narrative. He is (in)formed by his Christian faith, his devotion to his community and, later, to his wife, Cherry. As the narrative unfolds, clearly identifiable goals begin to emerge, namely the desire to challenge the institution of slavery, to free his friends and family, and to avenge those that have suffered by initiating a violent revolution against the representatives of their oppression.⁴

In classical Hollywood cinema, supporting characters are usually defined by “complementary or independent goals” (Bordwell et al. 15), tying their actions together and making them interdependent with the leading character’s storyline. Adhering to this, Parker brings the focus back to Turner in nearly every scene, using him to forward the story action, even if the action is not explicitly about Turner. In the opening scene, for example, Turner as a young boy is shown being anointed and celebrated in a ceremony that appears to derive from African religious practices. The following scenes briefly establish the relationship with young Sam Turner, his master’s son, during his childhood days, aiming to show that even the innocence of children is corrupted by slavery. While they are naturally drawn to each other as playmates, it also becomes clear that they are conscious of the power balance between them. However, not much time is given to develop any of the supporting characters like Sam Turner as an adult, i.e. the reasons for his alcoholism or how and why slavery corrupts him. Instead, Nat Turner remains the sole focal point of the film and his goals direct the audience through his personal trajectory through life and history—even in crucial moments that might otherwise help define the tragedy of other characters or bring a sense of complexity to Turner’s conflicted identity and motivations.

This is especially clear in the way in which Parker represents the female characters in the film. As critics (e.g. Elizabeth Beaulieu, William Andrews, bell hooks and Tracey Walters) have noted, black women have long been inadequately or offensively represented in Hollywood cinema (not excluding the work of black filmmakers). Stereotypes such as the promiscuous Jezebel, the bossy Mammy, the sassy Sapphire or the tragic Mulatto, were the prevalent mode of representation in Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*, and beyond. In Griffith’s film, white women, too, are caricatured, mainly functioning only on a symbolic level, such as serving to inspire white men to defend them and the value system they represent. The spectre of rape and miscegenation haunts the film and, indeed, the female protagonists’ consciousness: in one scene, Flora (Mae Marsh), the “Pet Sister” of the white slave owners jumps to her death rather than submit to the (ambiguous) advances of a black man (played by Walter Long). Black females, when they are represented at all, are conceived only as grotesque “types”, one-dimensional caricatures that are fierce, cantankerous and often condescending to black men (Green).⁵ Such representations existed before Griffith’s film and persisted long after, in both popular literature and film. One of Parker’s major challenges, then, was to move away from these and create independent and more fully rounded black characters. However, his version of *The Birth of a Nation* reverts to similar stereotypes and generally employs the female characters to facilitate plot progression, aid the male character’s development, and provide emotional supports that help form his character. For instance, Turner’s mother is his first source of succour and she encourages him to view himself as someone out of the ordinary. When he meets Cherry, she is rather problematically represented as both the abuse victim that needs rescuing, and a potential love interest. Parker shoots their initial meeting at a slave auction with a soft, mellow lighting, and accompanying and contrasting sounds of nature and the hustle and bustle of the market. Ostensibly, the scene is about the degrading treatment of human beings, and the particular sexual vulnerability of female slaves, but the preponderance of close-ups of Nat/Parker, as he urges Sam to buy Cherry and thus save her from probable rape, ensures that the focus remains on the male character and his goals (Lockett). In the same sequence, Sam buys Cherry and brings her back to the plantation where Nat and his family take care of her. Human compassion soon becomes courtship, as Nat makes any excuse to see her, introduce himself and give her flowers. In the scene in which he gives her the flowers, Parker uses a palette of earth tones, broken only by the dash of colour of the flowers. The melancholic world of Cherry, Parker seems to suggest, can only be disrupted by the vibrant presence of Nat and his

passion for her. From the beginning of their relationship, then, Cherry's character is used to facilitate the expression of Turner's feelings, and the development of an emotional depth that brings with it a more complex attitude to his own enslavement. An opportunity to develop Cherry Turner's character into the strong person that historical sources indicate she was is not availed of.

Parker's reliance on a clichéd presentation of women, and the fact that these female characters are represented as rather one-dimensional, is disappointing, specifically in light of his stated intention to overturn dominant representations of African Americans, and his oppositional stance to Griffith's film and all it entails. Black women in both "versions" of *The Birth of a Nation* lack agency, and as a consequence of their violation—in both cases sexual violence—one group of men is incited to exact revenge on another.

In both films, rape plays a central role in plot progression and justification of the protagonist's actions. Whereas in Griffith's film it is a (possible) threat of rape that drives Flora to suicide, and in turn, motivates her brother to exact vengeance and call up the Ku Klux Klan to support him, in Parker's film it is the actual rape of Cherry that pushes Turner (not her) to breaking point. Like Flora in Griffith's film, Cherry walks alone to a well to retrieve water; she is then surrounded by white slave-patrollers who gang-rape her. The actual rape scene is not shown, presumably for a number of reasons: first, rape scenes are generally problematic because filmmakers often run the risk of presenting details that are then perceived as gratuitous or titillating, but perhaps more specifically, Parker does not represent it because, if he did, the audience's focus and sympathy might shift to her, rather than staying on Turner. In comparison to Flora, Cherry has no agency or the "luxury" of choosing death over rape; she must silently endure the pain, the humiliation and the dehumanisation that is inflicted upon her. As noted, her rape serves to facilitate the plot of Turner's development of revolutionary consciousness: because she is abused, he is drawn to her, showing how tender he can be; because she is raped, he takes action; because he sees her battered body, his tears flow and the camera focuses in a close-up on his face (Figure 3). Though it is Cherry who experiences the unimaginable horrors of a brutal rape and beating, her suffering is eclipsed by (one of) Turner's final transformative moment(s): we see him look at her battered body and come to a realisation that the time for action has now come. Parker reinforces this emphasis by choosing to fill the screen, not with close-ups of Cherry's broken limbs or bruises, but with Nat's distraught face, as tears roll down it. As Salamishah Tillet argues, women are "silenced by the violations against their bodies and then again when their victimization is cast as secondary to Turner's heroism, their voices sidelined to the plot of Turner's realization of his own manhood in the horror of slavery". It seems that, to Parker, (black) men suffered more from the rape of "their" women than the women themselves. Neglecting the female perspective and role of women in these scenes arguably undermines Parker's credibility, especially because he confronts the audience with explicit scenes of brutal violence against men but not against women, disregarding the role and importance of the violation of the female body and psyche. Both Cherry and another black woman, Esther (Gabrielle Union) are raped and Parker's depiction of their response to trauma—silence—"mutes their [black women's] ability to act, rendering their rebellion virtually nonexistent in a film about revolt and freedom" (Tillet).

Despite historical documents that indicate otherwise, Turner's mother, his grandmother Bridget (Esther Scott), Cherry and her daughter are depicted in terms that starkly contrast to the heroic Turner. All are "helpless victims who suffer unspeakable horrors until Turner rides in on his horse and vows to seek vengeance on their behalf"

(Alexander). There is no doubt that Parker is attempting to portray Turner as the black saviour, the black leader, but in his scenes with black women he is also coded as the black liberator of femininity and female purity, much in the same way that Col. Ben Cameron and the Klan are protectors of (white) female purity in Griffith's film. Parker opts not to show how "enslaved women fought for their dignity and freedom, and ... exercised agency over their lives, in spite of unimaginable horrors" (Alexander). He also disregards the fact that an enslaved woman was caught, tried and executed for holding down her mistress and facilitating her murder during the Turner rebellion (Greenberg).⁶



Figure 3: Close-up and focus on Turner's face instead of Cherry's (Asia Naomi King) violated body, which is out of focus. *The Birth of a Nation*. Bron Studios, 2016. Screenshot.

Parker's reliance on the codes of classical narrative filmmaking, and his problematic representation of women, can be particularly seen in his employment of a device with which D. W. Griffith was associated, the close-up. While Griffith did not invent the technique, he was one of the first to employ them for dramatic, psychological and emotional resonance in his films (Stern and Gallen 95). Iris Barry argues that Griffith used

these devices to humanize his characters and give vitality to his stories. His contemporaries said that he "made thought visible". More than that, by discovering how to sustain suspense, how to compel his audiences to identify themselves with the action shown, he had rendered the films expressive and exciting. They were no longer merely something to look at: they also provoked imagination and feeling. (12)

Parker positions Turner as central to the resolution of society's ongoing crisis, and the audience finds itself accompanying Turner amidst the brutal consequences of his enslaved life.⁷ When the film was released, a number of critics compared it to Mel Gibson's historical epic *Braveheart* (1995). Epic films tend to centre around one strong character, "who controls his destiny" (Bâ qtd. in Holmlund and Wyatt 353), following the classical structure of an awakening of consciousness. As Robert Burgoyne argues, "typically, the epic hero gains the authority, the mandate to complete his quest only after becoming one with the multitude, falling into slavery, becoming a nomad, drawing from the multitude a heightened sense of purpose and nobility" (88). Furthermore, the epic hero "traditionally stands up for the community" (Gjelsvik qtd. in Holmlund and Wyatt 306). Parker's directorial decisions are strongly guided by the idea of Turner as the "black saviour" and on multiple occasions he is

presented—visually, and in the martyrdom associations of his execution—as a Christ figure. The focus on Turner as the conduit for his people’s revenge and redemption, however, is pushed to the background in the arc of the narrative. As is often the case with historical epics, at several points the distinction between the figure depicted and the actor that depicts is blurred: in Gibson’s film, there can be little doubt that the historical figure of William Wallace is less compelling than the spectacle of Gibson-playing-Wallace. Parker, too, seems to adhere to a model of presenting the historical figure in personalised terms that will “speak to” the audience, but the method he employs, which favours evocative close-ups, visual symbolism, directive music etc., threatens to overshadow the political message of black power that, ostensibly, is the film’s *raison d’être*. Parker’s imperative to present Turner as the focal point, and to conceive of him in Christ-like terms (visually and narratively) results, too, in the diminution of the supporting characters (Figures 4 and 5).



Figure 4 (above): Turner’s body tied to a makeshift cross in a Christ-like pose. **Figure 5 (below):** Turner in a prison cell before his execution, assuming a Christ pose, illuminated by divine light.
The Birth of a Nation. Bron Studios, 2016. Screenshots.

If Parker’s *The Birth of a Nation* does not seem to have lived up to its early promise, and his own stated intention to offer an independent film that would challenge dominant representations of black characters and undermine accepted readings of history, perhaps some

explanation for its failures might be found in the fact that this was his first feature film as director and producer. His use of formulaic conventions and a rather one-dimensional lead character perhaps reveals a novice's lack of sophistication behind the camera, but it may have been intended to focus the audience's attention and, like Griffith, encourage empathy for a figure that is historically remote. By presenting audiences with a central black character that appears in almost every scene, Parker certainly redresses the balance in American cinema, which is notable for the dearth of black lead characters.



Figures 6–8: Three images showing the fade from Turner during his execution to the boy who betrayed him during the rebellion, growing up to be a Union soldier. *The Birth of a Nation*. Screenshots.

The focus on Turner as the epic hero is, in itself, not a flaw; rather it is pertinent, given the historical context of Turner, who said he was motivated by apocalyptic visions. It also provides the possibility of a powerful challenge to Griffith, who offers his decidedly white audience a saviour of their own: the Ku Klux Klan. However, the fact that Parker wrote, directed, produced and acted the role gives this focus on Parker/Turner as the black saviour, as well as the film in general, a distracting air of self-aggrandisement. For example, in the second to last scene, Turner is hanged in the presence of a cheering crowd. While he appears to be unafraid of his impending death, the scene blends over gently from Turner's eyes during his last breath to the eyes of the young boy who betrayed Turner and his rebellion. The transition is completed when his crying eyes fade into the eyes of a Union soldier, the same boy as a grown man, fighting for freedom about thirty years later during the Civil War (Figures 6–8). In these final moments, Parker forces a connection between Turner's martyrdom, a black soldier in the Union army and eventual freedom of black people, drawing parallels between what he is attempting to do with his film and Turner's rebellion (Figure 9).



Figure 9: Nat Turner leading his men into rebellion. *The Birth of a Nation*. Bron Studios, 2016. Publicity Still.

Conclusion

The many dimensions of this film, including its technical aspects, the creative forces that brought the project together, Nate Parker's specific directorial decisions and the film's dramatic fall from grace after an initially warm reception, show how complex a text it is.

As I have argued, Parker set out to challenge and perhaps reinvent our understanding of the classical Hollywood mould with "a mainstream black-oriented film [which] dramatizes retaliatory violence as a respectable option" (Reid qtd. in Holmlund and Wyatt 123). In interviews, he drew parallels between Turner's rejection of the oppressive forces of slavery and his own project of rewriting received history and offering film audiences new versions of the past and of African-American characters. However, while he claimed the independence of

both himself as a filmmaker as well as his film, his creative decisions reveal a close connection with technical and narrative cinematic styling, codes and techniques employed by D. W. Griffith. While Parker may have intended for his film to be an oppositional force to Hollywood, offering a meaningful attack on Griffith's legacy of negative stereotyping, his film relies instead on the hallmarks of convention, classical codes and one-dimensional characterisation, also seen in the earlier film, resulting in a project that is fundamentally compromised.

Parker's use of these classical Hollywood elements, of course, is not problematic *per se*, since these elements are embedded in the film industry and used by a variety of filmmakers, some of whom also offer similar challenges to received history and to the presentation of the slave narrative. For instance, Steve McQueen uses many of the standard classical codes in his own cinematic slave narrative, *12 Years a Slave*. However, classical narrative conventions are not the only mode of presentation, as a variety of black independent filmmakers, such as Haile Gerima or Spike Lee, have demonstrated.

By using classical Hollywood convention to reach a wide-ranging audience, however, Parker sacrifices his transformative message. This aim to retain a maximum audience buy-in and identification with the importance of character and story ultimately meant shedding the more radical, experimental or chaotic aspects of the narrative. Moreover, Parker's film cannot be considered independent in important ways, specifically in terms of cinematic techniques and significantly in terms of ignoring or omitting content. Parker claimed victory as an independent auteur with an independent film, but my analysis shows that he uses mostly standardised cinematic techniques and simplified plot structure. This simplification of the story forces the film's focus on to one character, a shift that is problematic because it brings with it a diminishing of other characters. The concentration on Turner, while it has the potential to be significant and empowering, also loses momentum as with several scenes that seem to be more about showcasing Parker, in rather self-aggrandising fashion, than about addressing the issue of the paucity of complex black characters on screen. Arguably, the focus on one character, conceived and performed in highly symbolic terms, threatens to substitute Griffith's caricatures of black masculinity with an equally troubling/problematic caricature of the black hero who functions to save helpless women.

Critics largely agree that a film about Nat Turner was long overdue and that it is undeniably an important story with a critical cultural value that needs to be told. Turner was a complex and controversial historical figure, praised as an American hero and shunned as a religious fanatic. When Charles Burnett told the Nat Turner story, he chose to use documentary and re-enactment instead of an epic narrative. Parker seized this opportunity, however sanitizing critical aspects of history. He was unexpectedly overwhelmed by efforts to gloss over his own controversial history, which cut national attention away from his mission to affirm the reality and relevance of the black hero. Instead, it generated a loud public conversation about rape culture in the United States. By repeatedly failing to make public amends with his own past, Parker has drawn media attention to the very stereotypes he was trying to break in *The Birth of a Nation*. Ultimately, Parker's past brought the project down with him, prompting public protest and damaging box office takings. His project may have started deep within the mire of race and representation, but it has ended in a conversation about sexual violence, forcing the audience to decide if it is worth supporting a project that, despite its good intentions, is marred by its director's biography. It remains to be seen over the next years, then, whether audiences can forget the controversy around his film

and find the catharsis and redemption that he had hoped it would effect, and whether the film can create change agents, as Parker calls them, and for what kind of change.

Notes

¹ In contrast to the hype Parker enjoyed at Sundance, the October 2016 rollout of *The Birth of a Nation* was “obliterated by revelations about Parker’s past” (Schulman) and the film was suddenly branded with critical invective like “deeply flawed”, “historically inaccurate” and “shallow and superficial” (Alexander). The sustained volley of criticism that erupted after his past entered the 24-hour media cycle (and his inability to tactfully put the issue to rest) altered the glowing reviews the film initially received. Such a dramatic change in perception of the film over such a short time is curiously reminiscent of the enthusiastic reception of *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and the backlash that subsequently emerged. Within the span of less than a year, Parker’s project was exalted for the perception of its purpose and deep social importance, and fell when such high expectations were not only unfulfilled but also coupled with controversy. As a consequence, the film was not nominated by the Academy for any of the 2017 Academy Awards.

² For more information on the Nat Turner story see: Genovese; Greenberg; and Oates.

³ For more on independent black film see Diawara and Reid.

⁴ A more detailed analysis of Turner’s character, Parker’s performance of it, and the visual presentation of him, is beyond the scope of this article. For more on Turner, see Greenberg and Oates.

⁵ For more on black stereotypes on screen see Bogle.

⁶ For an exploration of the role of women in *The Birth of a Nation* see Alexander. For information about African American women (general), see: Beaulieu; Andrews; hooks and Walters.

⁷ Like Griffith, Parker also uses extensive period costumes and extravagant settings to achieve historical authenticity and accuracy, and to create an immersive viewing experience; a discussion of Parker’s mise en scène is beyond the scope of this article.

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